Background

Over the past 150 years, competition for water has escalated within the tributary area of the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta. Particularly in recent decades, population growth, with its attendant municipal and economic development, has placed increasing pressure on water resources.

Agricultural and urban water demands have contributed to groundwater depletion. Wastewater discharge and contamination in runoff have affected water quality in Central Valley rivers and the Delta. Agricultural and municipal development, as well as construction and operation of water systems such as the CVP, the State Water Project, and local projects and levee systems have also sharply reduced habitat that supports fish and wildlife resources in the Central Valley.

As early as the 1920's, California began seriously planning major public works projects that would allow greater use of the State's water resources through storage and diversions. Originally envisioned as part of the State Water Project, several of the cornerstone facilities, such as Shasta and Friant dams, were pursued under Depression-era federal policies. In the 1930's, the Bureau of Reclamation was authorized to construct the CVP with multiple objectives including navigation, flood control, water for agricultural and municipal use, and power to support these purposes.

Changes Due to Water Resource Projects

The CVP and other water projects have helped make the Central Valley the richest agricultural region in the nation. Low-cost water and power have also brought manufacturing, service, commerce, entertainment, and defense industries to the state, along with millions of jobs. Economic growth created increasing demand for goods and services that led to the large-scale conversion of natural habitat to agriculture and other uses.

Prior to the development of water resource projects in California, most anadromous fish migrated upstream to spawn from fall through spring. Storm flows also helped to move fish back downstream from spawning areas in the upper reaches. Runoff from rain and snow also repelled saltwater intrusion in the Delta.

Water resource projects throughout the Central Valley and foothills modified the flow patterns by shifting peak river flows to summer months, and highly impacting spawning and rearing conditions for anadromous fish species. In addition, reservoirs and diversions altered the temperature of some stream reaches, blocked fish passage to some colder water stream reaches that were needed for spawning and rearing, and entrained juvenile fish in the diversions.

Water resource development in California has, in general, led to expansion of both the demand and supply that impact water resources and the ecosystems that are dependent on them. Through the CVPIA, Interior will be implementing the programs to help restore environmental conditions altered by the CVP.